



Qing Dynasty Court Paintings and the Embodiment of Imperial Ideology

Zekun Xiao

Liaocheng University, Liaocheng 252000, Shandong, China.

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*Corresponding author: Zekun Xiao, Liaocheng University, Liaocheng 252000, Shandong, China.

Abstract

Qing dynasty court paintings were not only a part of royal art, but also an important medium for the Qing rulers to express imperial authority and cultural symbols through visual art forms. The purpose of this paper is to explore how Qing dynasty court paintings embodied imperial ideology and served the politics of imperial authority through their themes, styles, and symbolic elements while demonstrating the cultural aesthetics of the Qing rulers and the shaping of the national image. By analyzing the political and cultural symbols in Qing dynasty court paintings, this paper reveals the important role of Qing dynasty court paintings in maintaining political authority, promoting Confucianism, and demonstrating multi-ethnic harmony. At the same time, it analyzes how court paintings demonstrated the legitimacy of the Qing dynasty's external rule, consolidated centralized power, and conveyed the emperor's mandate of heaven and the legitimacy of his rule through detailed and symbolic images.

Keywords

Qing dynasty court paintings; imperial ideology; political symbols; cultural aesthetics; royal art

1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese painting, or “national painting”, is one of the four arts (qin, qi, shu and yu), of which court painting underwent great development from the Sui, Tang and Fifth Dynasties, and was perfected during the Ming and Qing dynasties, making Qing dynasty court painting an important part of the history of traditional Chinese art.

It is important to note that painting, as a cultural response to ideology, can to some extent reflect the dominant ideology of a particular time period. Here is a simple example of literati painting in the Wei, Jin, and North and South Dynasties. Gu Kaizhi's masterpiece “Luoshen Fu” shows a philosophy of the world in which the bones of the artist are clear and unappetizing, and it is obvious that, in connection with the strife of that era and the cries of the poor people of the lower strata of the family under the political oppression of the gatekeepers, the literati paintings in fact embody the reappearing thought of Huang Lao and the philosophy of escaping from the world in that era.

As for the Qing dynasty court painting, it is important to recognize its role as a symbol of imperial power in shaping the country's image and maintaining political authority. Additionally, it played a significant role in reflecting the cultural and aesthetic tastes of the Qing dynasty emperors. The Qing rulers conveyed the stability and prosperity of the empire through court paintings, shaping a unique style of royal art with elements of both Confucianism and ethnic minorities. This paper will focus on analyzing how the imperial ideology was embodied in Qing dynasty court paintings in terms of visual symbols, composition, and style.

1.1 Background of the Selected Topic

The imperial power of the Qing Dynasty played an important role in the whole of Qing history, and the court paintings

could reflect the characteristics and main ideology of the imperial power of the Qing Dynasty to a large extent. The research focus on this issue is often placed on the study of the emperor's policy in different periods of time, the study of social class structure, or the study of the emerging bourgeoisie, and there are some unclear expressions and internal conflicts between the various themes. For example, studies of the structure of the traditional workers, peasants, scholars, and merchants often tend to overlook the effects of the budding bourgeoisie in the late Ming. Theoretically, in a large feudal empire, there were various factors affecting the centralization of imperial power, and we even have to take into account various subjective factors, such as the personal preferences of the emperor. Existing studies are centered on the feudal emperor's policy or the feudal class structure of the elaboration of the academic world is usually the cultural level of the objective impact of the neglect, especially like the court painting in the cultural level is more like an object of study of art rather than historiography of the object of study of this kind of alternative, in the existing research in the relatively neglected position, this paper's relevant interpretation of the Qing dynasty is centered on the development of the palace paintings. Through the combing of the current Qing dynasty empire ideological issues in the field can be found that there is an important phenomenon: the Qing dynasty court paintings in all aspects of the centralized course of the Qing dynasty imperial power, and the official mainstream thinking.

1.2 Significance of the Selected Topic

This paper can make up for the shortcomings of the current research in the field of Qing history, expand the content of the ideological field of the Qing Empire, and promote the solution of related problems.

2. Historical Background and Stylistic Characteristics of Qing Dynasty Court Paintings

2.1 Historical Background

The Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) was the last feudal dynasty in Chinese history, and its court paintings, as an important part of Qing art, had a profound historical and cultural background. In the early Qing Dynasty, the Manchu rulers, after unifying China, faced with the strong influence of Han culture, gradually formed a court art system with national characteristics. Qing dynasty court painting is not only the artistic expression of the ruling class but also an important carrier reflecting politics, society, and culture.

2.2 Political Background

The establishment of the Qing Dynasty stemmed from the entry of the Manchus into the Central Plains. Early Qing rulers such as the Shunzhi Emperor (1644-1661) and the Kangxi Emperor (1661-1722) used culture and art as tools at the level of political propaganda in the process of consolidating power. While the Shunzhi Emperor was committed to the establishment of an integrated Chinese-Manchurian ruling order, the Kangxi Emperor, on the basis of his consolidation of power, demonstrated a strong centralized ideology and national identity through the creation of court paintings. In summary, at the beginning of the establishment of the Qing dynasty palace system and system was quite important to cultural scholars and painting the need for cultivation, especially in the Qing dynasty, the Kangxi emperor culture pulled together "refused to surrender" of the former dynasty cultural scholars (Li Xiaogui, 2023).

During the Qing dynasty, the emperors attached great importance to the creation of court paintings. They used paintings to promote the legitimacy and majesty of imperial power. Especially during the Kangxi and Qianlong periods, court painting reached its peak and became an important expression of imperial ideology. Paintings were not only used to record historical events but also as a tool for political propaganda, conveying the ruler's political philosophy and cultural identity.

2.3 Cultural Exchange

The Qing Dynasty was an important period of cultural exchange between China and the West. With the gradual liberalization of the "sea ban," the creation of court paintings was influenced by Western artistic concepts and techniques, which were gradually introduced into China. Some of the artists who came to China, such as the Italian painter Lang Shining, who combined Western perspective and light and shadow treatments, created new ideas for court painting. This cultural exchange not only enriched the expression of Qing dynasty court painting but also made it present a thousand variations in composition and color. "The importation of Western painting methods promoted the collision and intermingling of Eastern and Western cultures, enabling us to see the different aspects of Western

painting and combine them with the experience of traditional Chinese painting to create artistic masterpieces that are different from the traditional ones” (Huang Fang, 2012).

2.4. Choice of Subject Matter

2.4.1 Emperor Portraits and Historical Events

The emperor's self-portrait was one of his important subjects. The emperors in the paintings were usually depicted as majestic and dignified, wearing gorgeous dragon robes to demonstrate their supreme authority and status. These paintings were used not only for the decoration of palace interiors but also as attachments to official documents to convey the legitimacy of imperial power. Typical examples include *The Kangxi Emperor's Southern Inspection Tour*, which not only depicts the emperor's southern tour but also demonstrates the emperor's majesty while conveying his concern for people's livelihood. Among the various TV dramas depicting the Qing dynasty, there are many that dramatize the history, such as the most popular one “The Kangxi Emperor's Private Visit”, which depicts the Kangxi Emperor, played by Zhang Guoli, as a compassionate man who is motivated to rule the river, and who personally travels nine times down to the south of the Yangtze River to inspect the Yellow River, which has led to a scene of legendary storytelling for a long time. At first glance at the overview, one may not think there is a problem, however, in the drama often appear kind of plot is, the private visit of the Kangxi encountered by large and small corrupt officials or local squires, and these people often do not recognize him a small people is the emperor of the Qing dynasty, which is really mind-boggling. If the actions of a wealthy merchant are justifiable, it is peculiar that even mid-level officials do not recognize them. They must have seen numerous portraits of Emperor Kangxi, both large and small, throughout the years. At the very least, officials from the Ministry of Assessment, who return to the capital to report to the emperor, should have encountered the emperor in person. Furthermore, Emperor Kangxi's distinct facial features are well-known. However, since this is a television series, it may not be necessary to delve too deeply into these inconsistencies.

Court painters also recorded major historical events such as war victories, diplomatic activities and important celebrations through paintings. These paintings have both historical research value and reflect the imperial political flair of the time. For example, the *Triumph of the Pacification of the Western Regions*, depicting the pacification of the Western Regions by the Qing army, was intended to show the mighty unity of the Qianlong dynasty.

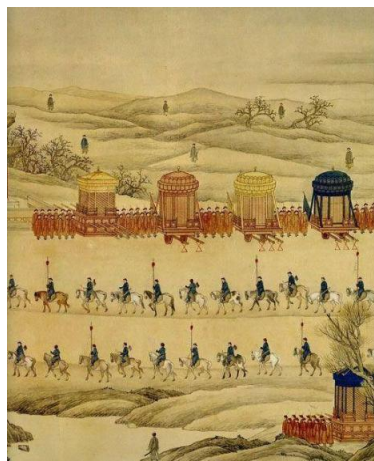


Figure 1. *The Kangxi Emperor's Southern Inspection Tour*.

2.4.2 Landscape Paintings

Landscape paintings occupied a pivotal position in Qing dynasty court paintings, and the landscape paintings of the Kangxi and Qianlong periods were especially prominent. This kind of paintings with natural landscapes as the theme, the pursuit of nature's aesthetics is expressed to the fullest extent. Landscape paintings express the natural beauty that symbolizes the country's wealth and stability.

The famous scenic spots such as the Yangtze River and Huangshan Mountain, depicted by court painters throughout the ages, are all famous landscapes. These paintings are comprehensive works of art formed through the fusion of various elements such as poetry and calligraphy. These appealing paintings implicitly serve the subjective purpose of pulling in the literati class, even though they do not directly promote imperial ideology.

2.4.3 Flowers, Birds, Insects and Fish

Flower and bird paintings were also an important subject of Qing dynasty court paintings. In addition to the aesthetic value it had, the images of flowers and birds it depicted were more symbolic of good fortune and the accumulation of wealth. The symbolic flowers are plum blossoms and peonies, which symbolize resilience and wealth respectively; cranes are animal images representing longevity. Since ancient times, it is the image often chosen in the painting has also been very good to feed the role.

Insects and fish in the Qing dynasty court painting are also more common, especially fish as a representative of the subject means “year after year”, “Yu” that is, implies a good harvest and happiness. Known for their meticulous brushwork and heavy color technique, the Qing painters portrayed these small animals in a distinctive manner, fully demonstrating their superior painting skills.

Similarly, the line modeling of traditional Chinese painting plays an indispensable role. “Chinese landscape painting mainly uses different kinds of lines to outline the inner and outer contours and boundaries of the objects, to represent the shape of the objects, and then to render the rocks, trees and so on with a few simple colors such as green and green, according to the colors of the objects” (J. Hu, 2024).

3. Palace Life and Festivals

Qing dynasty court paintings also often take court life as the theme, showing the daily activities within the palace, such as banquets, ceremonies, fun, and so on. These paintings often show the life of the emperor and his family through vivid scenes, reflecting the hierarchy and ceremonial culture of Qing society. The festivals of the Qing Dynasty, such as the Spring Festival, the Lantern Festival, and the Shangyuan Festival, were also important subjects for court paintings. These paintings not only show the lively atmosphere of the festivals but also reflect the folk customs and cultural traditions of the Qing Dynasty. It should be known that the Manchu ruled in the Qing Dynasty, and the theme of the nation is still the majority of the Han Chinese, in this case, the Han Chinese have always been the direction of the Qing rulers in order to consolidate feudalism and efforts, as in the past, many ethnic minorities after the occupation of the Central Plains, the Manchus also inevitably began the process of Sinicization, and thus these Spring Festival paintings are also the result. process, and thus there are these depictions of the Spring Festival Lantern Festival over the Han Festival.

4. Religion and Myth

Religious themes in Qing court paintings are not to be ignored, especially the elements of Buddhism and Taoism often appear in paintings, which depict Buddhist practice scenes, and legends of gods and goddesses, showing respect and reverence for religious beliefs. This is not only a means of stabilizing national security, in fact, the emperor's own attitude towards religion can also be used as a reason for the creation of these paintings, such as the Yongzheng Emperor's love of Buddhism has been the consensus of the academic community.

5. Imperial Ideology in Palace Painting

5.1 Symbol of Imperial Power and Political Propaganda

One of the most central functions of court painting is to serve the propaganda of imperial power. Portraits of the emperor himself were the most politically symbolic works in Qing dynasty court paintings, especially in the Kangxi and Qianlong periods, imperial portraits showed the divine authority of the emperor through opulent costumes, solemn gestures, and symbolic backgrounds. These paintings were not only decorations within the palace but also symbols of national majesty, used to appease officials and minority leaders everywhere and to demonstrate the solidity and prestige of the Qing Empire.

And, from the subjective level of analysis, a large part of the palace painting is based on the emperor's own will and creation, the Kangxi dynasty in the study of the palace painting enamel is very illustrative. “Last year, the slave will be a few kinds of local products respectfully tribute into the decree: I body security.”

When you go to, had Oracle all things shall not be a tribute, how to tribute? Subsequently, if you get wine, paint pigments, or send, the rest are stopped. In case of useful items, depending on the decree “I am well, the moment is already at the time of the arrival of the Western ships in Guangdong, if the arrival, quickly asked, and will be Yi and other letters to repair the folders to report. Do not delay “This time can get the news of the Westerners? If so, do not

press a little” (Wang Xiaohong, 1996). The development of court enameling began in the Kangxi period, scholars agree that the production of court enameling and the Kangxi Emperor's interest in Chinese and Western culture and art is closely related to a large number of approvals during the Kangxi period, as well as the letters of the Christian missionaries in the early Qing Dynasty are proof of this.

5.2 Multi-ethnic Unity and Cultural Inclusion

The Qing rulers demonstrated the concept of “multi-ethnic unity” through court paintings, especially during the Qianlong period, which emphasized the legitimacy of rule over all ethnic groups. The Qianlong emperor ordered his painters to depict the tributes paid by ethnic minorities from all over the world, demonstrating the idea of “one world”. For example, *The Pilgrimage of the Ten Thousand Nations*, with its exaggerated scenes of tribute, shows the Qing Dynasty as the center of the world, reinforcing the image of control and tolerance of all ethnic groups.



Figure 2. *Ten Thousand Nations Coming to Prayer.*

In fact, this picture of *Ten Thousand Nations Coming to Prayer* embodies not only the traditional unification of ethnic minorities within the boundaries of the Qing Empire (e.g., Mongolia and Tibet), but also includes neighboring countries such as Japan, Korea, Ryukyu, etc., as well as far away envoys such as the English, etc., and the picture, as with many other works of the same kind, is intended to promote the virtue of the Qing government and to show the prosperity of “four barbarians, ten thousand nations coming to pay homage to”. This painting, like many others of its kind, was created at the behest of the Qianlong Emperor to celebrate the Qing government and to show the prosperity of the “four barbarians and ten thousand nations coming to the imperial court”, with only slight differences in the details between the works.

5.3 Embodiment of Confucianism and Rituals

Confucianism remained as the dominant ideology in the Qing dynasty, and in the paintings of ritual ceremonies, court celebrations, and other scenes, these paintings emphasized ritual and moral order. The power of the emperor, as the Confucian ideal of the “son of heaven,” was seen as a mandate from heaven. Through grand ceremonial scenes, the benevolence of the emperor and his authority in the ritual system are rightfully displayed. For example, the paintings of ritual scenes during the Qianlong period not only show the solemn royal etiquette, but also convey the core values of Confucian ethics through meticulous images.

In fact, the translations of canonical books and court paintings are similar. Especially in the process of promoting Manchu integration into Chinese culture, the Qing rulers paid much attention to the translation of Confucian texts. the Han Dynasty, when Confucianism was honored, it became the official ideology of the state in successive dynasties.

Confucius became the symbol of Confucianism, and the reverence for Confucianism became the cultural root of the political legitimacy of successive kings. “After the Ming and Qing dynastic reforms, the Qing rulers constructed the system of governance from the Taoist system and made the two united to shape their Chinese orthodox status. The translation of Confucian texts was an important means for the Qing to build up the Taoist system” (Zhou Zhongliang, 2023).

6. Cultural Aesthetics and the Shaping of National Image

6.1 The Aesthetic Style of Royal Art

Although Qing dynasty court painting was a reflection of imperial ideology, at the same time often had the direct mandate of the emperor himself. But we must not overlook the fact that it was in fact a reflection of the emperor's personal cultural tastes. The Qianlong Emperor paid particular attention to art collection and creation, encouraging painters to create works related to nature and landscapes in order to demonstrate his love of nature and his shared tastes with the traditional scholarly class. For example, the copy of *Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* not only demonstrates the legacy of artistic aesthetics but also reflects the Qing ruler's desire to symbolize the longevity of the nation through landscape painting. In fact, this also implies a ruling philosophy of ruling the world together with the literati, which was carried over from the Song Dynasty. We have to see that, although the imperial power of the Ming and Qing dynasties has been in the process of continuous centralization, the continuation and legitimacy of its regime relied on the large and small literati distributed throughout the empire, that is, it is difficult to find their place in the modern class division of the scholar class.



Figure 3. *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains.*

7. Conclusion

Qing dynasty court painting is a form of artistic expression, but at the same time, we have to recognize that it also carries complex political and cultural symbols, reflecting the strategy of the Qing rulers to demonstrate their power and consolidate their rule through art. As the saying goes, the economic base influences the superstructure, and the superstructure exerts a counterforce on the economic base. Qing dynasty court paintings were born under the feudal economic form, and were fostered by the feudal ruling class, therefore, they rightly reflected the feudal ideology. We have no hesitation in concluding that through an in-depth analysis of these paintings, we see how Qing court paintings, through visual symbols and aesthetic styles, conveyed the imperial ideology and demonstrated the majesty of the imperial power, while at the same time shaping the image of a culturally rich and multifaceted Qing empire. Qing court paintings, the spokesman of feudal imperial power, showed the ideal side of what the ruling class wanted to see, and mainly played the role of maintaining feudal rule.

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